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# Counterfactuals, History and Fiction

*Richard Ned Lebow*\*

**Abstract:** »Kontrafaktische Annahmen, Geschichte und Fiktion«. Counterfactuals help us recognize the contingent nature of many political outcomes, probe the causes and contingency of these outcomes and evaluate them by imagining other outcomes and their consequences. Most importantly, counterfactuals have the potential to make us aware of the extent to which our deepest held assumptions about how the world works are themselves the result of inferences drawn from contingent outcomes. This recognition can help us step outside of our world and view it from perspectives.

**Keywords:** counterfactuals, contingency, evaluation, theory, testing, World War I.

From Max Weber on, good social scientists have recognized that any regularities in behavior must be understood in terms of their cultural setting and endure only as long as it remains stable and the regularities themselves go unrecognized by relevant actors. At best, the social world can be described in terms of punctuated equilibria. Regularities exist within bounded social domains, but those domains are often subject to sharp discontinuities that can change the pattern of practices, how they are understood or even the ends which they seem to serve. The search for regularities needs to be complemented by the investigation of ruptures, sometimes caused by changes in both ideational and material conditions, that undermine existing regularities and the understandings of actors on which they are often based. Counterfactual analysis is particularly suited to this task because it allows us to explore the workings and consequences of non-linear interactions in open-ended systems in ways many other methods do not.

My research speaks to historians because they have an equal interest in causation and increasingly understand that if we say x caused y, we assume, *ceteris paribus*, that “y” would not have occurred in the absence of “x.” As we cannot rerun the tape of history, we must, of necessity, use counterfactuals to probe causation. Counterfactuals speak to historians in a second important way. They can often be used to demonstrate the contingency of important events like the origins World War I that are critical for our understanding of the past. By recognizing the contingency of World War I, and of other critical twentieth century events that followed from it, we become aware of the extent to which

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our most fundamental assumptions about how the political world works are themselves contingent. Counterfactual thought experiments provide a vantage point for taking ourselves outside of our world and our assumptions about it where they can be subjected to active and open interrogation. Such an exercise not only drags into the open assumptions that are so deeply ingrained that they are taken for granted, but facilitates imaginative leaps in historical understanding.

World War I was the dominant international event of the twentieth century. It hastened the ascendancy of the United States as the world's leading economic power, led to the breakup of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires and set in motion a chain of events that ultimately led to the demise of the British, French, Spanish and Portuguese empires as well. The War decimated a generation of young men and killed millions of civilians made vulnerable to influenza and other pathogens by the ravages of war, dislocation, ethnic cleansing and allied blockade. It triggered a revolution in Russia, which had echoes in eastern and central Europe and more lasting resonance in China and Southeast Asia. Collectively, these developments made it almost impossible to restore political and economic stability to Europe, helping to pave the way for Hitler's rise to power, the Holocaust and a second, far more deadly, bid for hegemony by Germany in alliance with Italy and Japan. World War II in turn gave rise to a Cold War between the Soviet bloc and the West that kept Europe divided for fifty years and the target of thousands of nuclear weapons that at the push of a button could have turned the continent into a desolate, uninhabitable no-man's land.

World War I and the events that followed had equally profound cultural and intellectual consequences. Europe's self-confidence was lost along with its leading role in the world, encouraging forms of artistic expression that communicated defiance, doubt, confusion and alienation. Many artists and intellectuals sought refuge in a highly idealized image of Soviet-style socialism. Europe's internecine struggles and exhaustion after World War II dramatically accelerated the hegemony of the United States. After 1945, it became the leader of the self-proclaimed "Free World," helped finance the reconstruction of Western Europe and Japan, imposed its political and economic institutions and practices wherever it could and gained wider influence through aid, trade and investment. Extraordinary levels of investment at home in education and research, charitable support for the arts and the immigration of thousands of Europe's leading scientists, artists and intellectuals made the U.S. the world's leader in medicine, science, space exploration and the creative and performing arts. American popular culture became global in its appeal, leading some intellectuals to worry about Hollywood's hegemony and debasement of real culture and others to celebrate it as a "soft power" resource (Horkheimer and Adorno 2001; Nye 1990).

Many historians, social scientists and international relations scholars consider these outcomes overdetermined. Until quite recently, the conventional wisdom among historians was that Europe in 1914 was like dry kindling just waiting to be set aflame by a match (Afflerbach and Stevenson 2007). If the assassinations at Sarajevo had not triggered a continental war, some other provocation would have. International relations scholars have developed theories like power transition and offensive dominance to explain why a European war was all but inevitable. World War II appears at least as inevitable to many scholars given German dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles and the aggressive goals and risk-taking propensity of Hitler, Mussolini and Japanese leaders. So does the Cold War in the light of the power vacuum in the heart of Europe at the end of World War II and the antagonistic social systems of the two victorious superpowers. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the U.S. as a “unipole” appear just as inevitable to some observers. Students of the former Soviet Union, liberal theorists and proponents of globalization provide numerous reinforcing reasons why Soviet-style communism was doomed and American-style capitalist democracy the wave of the future (Clark forthcoming).

The view that our world is the only possible world, or at least the most likely of all worlds, has multiple and reinforcing causes. There is the hindsight bias, by which we upgrade the probability of events once they have occurred and come to regard the past as overdetermined – but the future as highly contingent (Fischhoff 1975; Hawkins and Hastie 1990). The hindsight bias is reinforced by the very nature of the scholarly enterprise. Historians and social scientists make reputations for themselves by proposing new explanations or theories to account for major events like the fall of the Roman Empire, the industrial and French Revolutions, the World Wars and the Cold War. Confronted by ever growing explanations for events of this kind, none of which can generally be dismissed out of hand, they appear massively overdetermined. The need for psychological closure also plays a role. In a set of surveys and experiments (Lebow and Tetlock in Lebow 2009) Phil Tetlock conducted to probe how people understand the consequences of their beliefs. Those who see the world as to a great extent ordered and predictable display a need for psychological closure and are hostile to suggestions of contingency – unless it helps to explain away an outcome inconsistent with their world views or preferred theories. Not surprisingly, many international relations scholars cluster towards the order and predictability end of the continuum. Whether they are socialized into understanding the world this way, or choose to become social scientists in part for this reason, the end result is the same: they are generally unwilling to recognize, or uncomfortable with the thought if they do, that important social outcomes could be the result of agency, chance or simply bad weather.

Discussions in the coffee lounge with thoughtful colleagues and feedback from faculty and graduate students at institutions where I gave seminars on my book (Lebow 2008) indicate considerable interest in counterfactuals as a research tool but widespread confidence in the high probability, if not near inevitability, of major twentieth century international outcomes, including those described in the paragraphs above. When I suggested that World War I might have been avoided if Franz Ferdinand and his wife had not been murdered by Serbian nationalists, I was frequently told that Europe was on the precipice of war and surely would have been tipped over the edge by some other concatenation of events. Behind this claim lay the belief that World War I was the product of systemic causes. When I raised the possibility of the Cuban missile crisis provoking a superpower war I met similar objections but a different argument. Policymakers are not entirely irrational, I was frequently told, and given the U.S. conventional advantage in the Caribbean and the overwhelming U.S. strategic nuclear advantage at the time the Soviet Union had no choice but to capitulate. This argument was made during the crisis by Maxwell Taylor, who insisted that if Khrushchev had other ideas more sober Soviet officials would soon assert their authority (Neustadt 1989). Not surprisingly, I found few colleagues convinced by my argument that had a European or World War in the first two decades of the twentieth century been averted, or if the Germans had won it, we might be living in a world in which authoritarian corporatism might have competed successfully against democratic, *laissez-faire* capitalism. These counterfactuals elicited a third generic argument: that the social world resembles nature in its competitiveness and natural selection. Practices and institutions that work efficiently will win out over those that are not. Democratic capitalism would ultimately have triumphed.

Policymakers rarely act in response to explicit theories but commonly rely on more informal understandings of how the world works. They display the same belief in the retrospective near-inevitability of important historical outcomes as their academic counterparts. In interviews with numerous American, Soviet and European politicians, diplomats and military officers who played prominent roles in the end of the Cold War, Richard Herrmann and I found that almost all of them believed that the Cold War had to end when and how it did. At the same time, these policymakers insisted on the contingency of developments critical to this outcome in which they played a major role. They told us how easily such developments (e.g., arms control, the unification of Germany) could have been forestalled or worked out differently if it had not been for their skill, relationships with their opposite numbers or ability to collaborate with them behind the backs of their respective governments. They seemed unaware of the contradiction between these two positions and struggled to reconcile them when pushed by us to do so (Herrmann and Lebow 2001).

There is something wrong with this story. If major historical developments are so inevitable the pattern of events leading to them should not be so contin-

gent. If events are overdetermined, the underlying conditions responsible for these events should have been apparent at the time to scholars and policymakers alike, making them – although not their timing and specific expression – to some degree predictable. None of the events in question were self-evident at the time. In the decade prior to 1914 there was a general expectation among many military authorities and some, but by no means all, political leaders that a European war was likely. There was nevertheless remarkable optimism, within the diplomatic and business community, that mutual trade and investment had made war increasingly irrational and less likely. On the eve of the war books advancing both arguments were run-away best-sellers (Angell 1910; Bernhardt 1912). European opinion was also divided on World War II, with many of those in power in France and Britain and the Soviet Union convinced that Hitler had limited aims or could be bought off with territorial and other concessions. For quite different reasons, Churchill and Roosevelt expected to be able to do business with the Soviet Union after World War II. Writing in 1959, John Herz reminds us that the advent of bipolarity was as unexpected as the atomic age, in part responsible for it (Herz 1959). Hardly anybody predicted the onset of the Cold War or its demise, let alone the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early decades of the Cold War, American foreign policy experts worried that the Soviet model would be more appealing to so-called Third World countries than liberal capitalism. In its latter decades, members of the U.S. national security community thought it possible, if not likely, that the Soviet Union would pull ahead militarily and act more aggressively. Both expectations were wide of the mark.

Single events are admittedly the most difficult kind to predict. However, our record is arguably no better when it comes to trends, patterns and macro outcomes where prediction rests on the role of reason, social selection or some other alleged feature of the environment. A socialist world, which Marx thought would require revolution, and later revisionists hoped to bring about through the ballot box, is perhaps the best-known example. Socialists and conservatives alike assumed that education and economic development would make the world increasingly secular and that the power of religion would recede into history. Premature triumphalism by neo-conservatives about liberal democracy and laissez-faire capitalism, which found voice in such best-sellers as Daniel Bell's *End of Ideology* (1960) and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), also proved far off the mark. It is too early to pass judgment on predictions like those of Thomas Friedman (1999) that globalization will usher in age of peaceful, liberal trading states – or, as its opponents insist, an era of vast disparities in wealth and crushing cultural uniformity. I suspect that the future will once again defy prediction based on narrowly formulated logical arguments and linear projections.

I learned this lesson early in my academic career; my first teaching post was at Brooklyn College in 1965, just as the social-political revolution of the 1960s

moved into high gear. The civil rights movement had been underway for some time and the anti-war movement was about to begin. Woodstock was three years off, but flower power was in full bloom, bras were beginning to go the way of girdles and the air was redolent with the pungent aroma of pot and joss sticks. To my senior colleagues, these developments were as unanticipated as they were unpalatable. There are good reasons why they were caught off-guard. In retrospect, the transformation of the 1960s was a classic example of a non-linear confluence. The postwar economic boom made rock and roll possible and both developments, along with access to automobiles and burgeoning college enrollments, generated a distinctive youth culture. The birth control pill, the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, all of which arrived hard on the heels of rock and roll, made that culture increasingly defiant. Systematic factors, including key international developments, were an important part of this story, but so were timing, chance and accident.

Non-linear transformations admittedly stack the deck against prediction. Non-linear, as I use it, describes an outcome produced by one or more variables where the effect is additive or multiplicative. Any other interaction is non-linear. This would include outcomes that involved step functions or phase transitions. The hard sciences routinely describe non-linear phenomena. Making predictions about them becomes increasingly problematic when multiple variables are involved that have complex interactions. Some simple nonlinear systems can quickly become unpredictable when small variations in their inputs are introduced (Gleick 1987; Bak and Chen 1991). As so much of the social world is non-linear, fifty plus years of behavioral research and theory building have not led to any noticeable improvement in our ability to predict events. This is most evident in the case of transformative events like the social-political revolution of the 1960s, the end of the Cold War and the rise and growing political influence of fundamentalist religious groups.

Radical skepticism about prediction of any but the most short-term outcomes is fully warranted. This does not mean that we can throw our hands up in the face of uncertainty, contingency and unpredictability. In a complex society, individuals, organizations and states require a high degree of confidence – even if it is misplaced – in the short-term future and a reasonable degree of confidence about the longer-term. In its absence they could not commit themselves to decisions, investments and policies. Like nudging the frame of a pin-ball machine to influence the path of the ball, we cope with the dilemma of uncertainty by doing what we can to make our expectations of the future self-fulfilling. We seek to control the social and physical worlds not only to make them more predictable but to reduce the likelihood of disruptive and damaging shocks (e.g., floods, epidemics, stock market crashes, foreign attacks). Our fall-back strategy is denial. We convince ourselves that the future will more or less resemble the past, or deviate from it in predictable or manageable ways. We remain unreasonably confident in our beliefs despite the dramatic discontinui-

ties of even the recent past – some of them caused by shocks we could not predict or control. The hindsight bias makes us exaggerate our estimates of the probability of events that actually occur while belief system defenses lead us to exaggerate the reasonableness of our prior expectations that other outcomes would occur. Belief system defenses reinforce the hindsight bias and help to explain away predictive failures.

There may be something more fundamental than either the hindsight bias or the need to believe in rationality that makes people – not just international relations scholars – reluctant to accept the important role of contingency in the social world. Prominent thinkers suggest that human beings harbor deep-seated fears about uncertainty and accordingly do their best to convince themselves that they can predict, even control, the future. David Hume (1999: Part III, Book 2, sect. 9) believed that “everything that is unexpected affrights us.” Martin Heidegger (1962, 18th *edition*) theorized at length about the anxiety generated by uncertainty and mortality. Terror Management Theory builds on this insight as do Anthony Giddens and the ontological security research program (Giddens 1984; Greenberg et al 1994). In earlier times the universal human need to reduce anxiety about the future through some form of control found expression in efforts to propitiate the gods. Max Weber (1948) believed that modern people could no longer credibly invoke spirits and magic to control their environment, but prayer is alive and well in our society – and becoming more prevalent according to some surveys – despite the absence of any evidence of its efficacy. The enduring belief in the power of prayer is undoubtedly another sign of people’s need to believe that they can influence the future, and all the more so when they live in uncertain and dangerous times.

The behavioral revolution in social science might be understood as another expression of this primal need. Its bedrock assumption is that the social environment is sufficiently ordered to be described by universal, or at least widely applicable, laws. Regularities in behavior make the past comprehensible and the future to some degree predictable. The appeal of deterrence during the Cold War – to theorists and policymakers alike – offers a telling example. It was psychologically and politically reassuring to think that the bogey of nuclear war could be kept at bay by the rational practice of deterrence against the Soviet Union. Empirical support for deterrence was entirely counterfactual: the widespread belief that World War II and its horrors might have been prevented if only major European powers had stood firm against Hitler in 1936 or 1938. During the Cold War deterrence repeatedly failed (i.e., did not prevent challenges it was intended to) but was repeatedly confirmed tautologically. Political scientists interpreted encounters like the two Berlin and Taiwan Straits crises as deterrence successes, assuming that the Soviet Union or China would have attacked Berlin or Taiwan in the absence of American immediate deterrence (Allison 1971; George and Smoke 1974; Lebow and Stein 1990). Deterrence failures like the Soviet missile deployment in Cuba were explained away with



the counterfactual argument that these challenges could have been prevented if American presidents had practiced more forcibly. Evidence that came to light at the end of the Cold War would reveal that Soviet and Chinese leaders never doubted American resolve and that the forceful practice of deterrence by both sides – in the form of arms build-ups, forward deployments and bellicose rhetoric – repeatedly provoked behavior it was intended to prevent. The two Berlin crises and Cuba being cases in point (Chang 1990; Zhang 1992; Hopf 1994; Lebow and Stein 1994).

In the United States – as distinct from Europe – faith in the science of politics remains high despite the inability of several generations of behavioral scientists to discover the kinds of laws that exist in the hard sciences. There is a widespread belief that the social world is governed by the same kind of regularities as the physical world and that discovery of them will allow us to explain past developments and make reasonable predictions of a probabilistic nature. I do not deny the existence of regularities in social behavior; there is ample evidence for them – and for the power of constraints and opportunities to shape the behavior of actors. As Max Weber (1949) observed, these regularities, and the “laws” to which they allegedly give rise, are short-lived because of the reflective nature of human beings and the open-ended nature of the social world. Once regularities are known, actors take them into account, undermining their validity, as in the case of the famous “January effect” – an increase in the stock market following the release of annual reports (Thayer 1987). Alternatively, they are undercut by changes in the environment that alter the underlying conditions on which the regularity depends, as in the case of party identification to predict voting patterns in American elections (Almond 1977).

The general reluctance of historians and social scientists to take non-systematic factors seriously is adequate provocation to direct our attention to them. Are they really inconsequential for theory building or do they confound predictive theories in ways that are little understood or appreciated? Could key events like World War I have been untracked by credible minimal rewrites of history? What if Franz Ferdinand had not been assassinated and there had been no European war in 1914? What if Hitler had died on the Western front during World War I instead of surviving, against all odds, almost four years of trench warfare? What if President Hindenburg had exercised his emergency powers more responsibly and Hitler had never come to power? What if Britain and France had prevented Hitler’s remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 or had stood firm together with the Soviet Union at Munich in 1938? What if Kennedy had given in to hawkish demands for an air strike against the Soviet missiles in Cuba? What if Chernenko had not been succeeded by Gorbachev but another aging party hack intent on postponing any meaningful reform, rightly fearing its domestic and foreign consequences?

Any of these outcomes were possible and some were arguably more likely than not. The list of cases can easily be extended. Counterfactual historians

have identified numerous “bifurcation points” where they contend history could easily have taken a radically different course. They run the gamut from military and political events like the ones noted above to more complex developments like the rise of religions and the industrial revolution (Crowley 1999; Tetlock, Lebow and Parker 2006). In *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Lebow 2009) I show how easily the assassinations of Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie could have been avoided and the many reasons to think that if there had been no continental war in 1914 Europe had at least an even chance to evolve peacefully over the next decade. A peaceful Europe would have been dominated by Germany, the economic and intellectual powerhouse of the continent. German would have rivaled English as the language of business and science and its corporate model of capitalism would have provided an alternative to the more laissez-faire practices of Britain and the United States. A German dominated continent would have aborted the birth of the Soviet Union, and while Russia would have survived in some shrunken form, it is less likely that it would have become a superpower. Britain would probably have moved closer to the U.S. as a means of offsetting German influence. In a multi-polar world, international relations theory would have concerned itself with a different set of problems.

Consider a darker scenario arising from an American invasion of Cuba in 1962. The Kennedy administration did not know that Soviet combat forces in Cuba were equipped with nuclear-tipped Luna ground-to-ground missiles and authorized to use them against an invasion force (Gribkov 1992; Lebow and Stein 1994, 294-95). If they had destroyed the American invasion fleet, the U.S. might have responded with a nuclear attack against the Soviet Union. Even if escalation had stopped short of an all-out nuclear war, the Cold War would have been put on a very different and more confrontational course. Détente would have been much less likely and so too the gradual evolution of the Soviet Union away from its commitment to communism and the Cold War. Damaged and humiliated by American nuclear strikes, the post-Khrushchev leadership might have become more aggressive in its foreign policy. If the destruction of the American invasion fleet had led to a wider nuclear war there might not have been a Soviet Union in its aftermath. The United States and Western Europe would almost certainly have been the targets of nuclear weapons in such an exchange, giving rise to a bleak and largely unpredictable future.

Historians and social scientists in either of these worlds would have described them as largely determined. In a Europe that avoided a continental war in 1914, or any time afterwards, liberalism would have been the dominant paradigm in the UK and the US, and socialism would have retained its appeal to intellectuals on the continent. Liberal international relations scholars would have developed theories about the restraining consequences of industrial development, international trade, international law and trade union movements. Sociologists would have stressed the beneficial consequences of education,

widespread affluence, smaller families and longer life expectancy. If Germany had democratized, it seems likely that some variant of the democratic peace thesis would have emerged.

If the Cuban missile crisis had led to war, conventional or nuclear, historians would have constructed a causal chain leading ineluctably to this outcome. It might begin with the Russian Revolution and the ideological cleavage it created between East and West, and go on to include the mistrust and hostility created by the different but equally self-serving ways the Western democracies and the Soviet Union responded to the threat of Nazi Germany, the subsequent division of Europe, efforts by both superpowers to destabilize and penetrate the other's sphere of influence, the spread of their competition to other parts of the world, nuclear arms racing and threats and finally, a crisis spiral (Berlin, Laos, Cuba) badly managed by insecure and risk-prone leaders (Kennedy and Khrushchev). Instead of explaining the "long peace," historians would have compared the run-up to World War III to the pre-1914 division of Europe into competing alliance systems and the series of crises that led to the July crisis and World War I. Realism would be the dominant paradigm in international relations, although its proponents would see no distinction between bi- and multi-polar systems. Counterfactual speculation that a superpower war could have been avoided and the Cold War brought to a peaceful end by the transformation and de facto capitulation by the Soviet Union would be greeted with the same degree of incredulity that suggestions of a peaceful twentieth century Europe meet in ours.

In *Forbidden Fruit* (Lebow 2009) I do not engage in counterfactual speculation merely to make the case for the plausibility of alternate worlds. The contingency of our world should be self-evident to any serious reader of history. I use counterfactuals to probe the limits of theory and to develop better means of understanding causation in a largely open-ended, non-linear highly contingent world. If regularities are short-lived, we have an equal interest in discovering them *and* their limitations and shelf lives. To date, social scientists have directed their efforts to the discovery of regularities, not to the conditions and dynamics that degrade them. Those who believe in systematic or structural approaches to social science – terms I use interchangeably to refer to theorizing based on the discovery of regularities – ought to be equally interested in this latter question. I contend that counterfactual probing of transformations is a first and necessary step toward this goal. I examine two case studies that speak directly to these problems, as they probe contingency and the causes of international transformations. In the conclusion I elaborate a method for better determining the contingency of outcomes.

I also use counterfactuals to probe how policymakers, historians and social understand causation. To the extent that our understandings of the past are in thrall to cognitive and motivated biases, counterfactuals can help us recognize and overcome these impediments to greater openness and objectivity. My sur-

veys and experiments reveal the power of beliefs to influence receptivity to counterfactuals but also the ability of counterfactuals to increase our estimates of contingency. These chapters also probe the relationship between belief systems and openness to counterfactuals that make and unmake history in ways the reinforce or undercut beliefs.

Finally, I show how counterfactuals can be used to provide otherwise unattainable perspectives on our world. We cannot easily step outside of this world and the beliefs we hold about it. Alternate worlds not only make this possible, they compel us to do so if we take them seriously. By providing distance from our world they are an indispensable means of evaluating it, empirically and normatively. They also provide insight into how we make sense of our world and why we are drawn to certain kinds of assumptions and theories. Such insight is helpful, if not essential, to theory building and evaluation. Toward this end I use a short story and an analysis of two political novels, one of them counterfactual. In contrast to good social science, good literature tells stories that draw readers in, emotionally as well as intellectually. They provide macro-level insights by placing readers in micro-level encounters, relationships and situations. Literature and its analysis accordingly have the potential to contribute to social science in important ways. This is a theme I began to explore in *The Tragic Vision of Politics* (Lebow 2003) where I argued, *pace* Nietzsche, that music, art and literature provide knowledge and experience that cannot be expressed in words and, by doing so, refresh our soul, heighten or provide new visions on that part of the world we seek to understand through language and concepts and the kind of knowledge they enable. The arts, humanities and the social science, while fundamentally different in their methods and often in the responses they invoke in us, should nevertheless be regarded as parallel projects leading greater understanding of ourselves and our world. In this volume, I try to substantiate this claim by showing how counterfactual literature offers insights into history and international relations that social science cannot and how these insights can further the task of history and social science.

At the outset, I advance a novel and provocative epistemological claim: that the difference between so-called “factual” and counterfactual arguments is more one of degree than of kind. Both rest on assumptions about the world and how it works and connect hypothesized causes to outcomes by means of a chain of logic consistent with available evidence. In factual arguments there is rarely, if ever, a “smoking gun” that allows researchers to maintain with any degree of certainty that a particular cause was responsible for an outcome. The plausibility of factual and counterfactual arguments alike rests on the appeal of their assumptions, the tightness of the logic connecting cause to effect and the richness of the evidence that supports, or is at least consistent with, the steps in the logical chain. The fundamental similarity between the structure of counterfactual and factual arguments means that many of the criteria for assessing the plausibility of one kind of argument are appropriate to the other. There are

nevertheless additional criteria for good counterfactual arguments, and here we must be careful to distinguish good from valid counterfactuals. The criteria for a good counterfactuals says a lot about their utility for purposes of analysis but nothing about their external validity. External validity can sometimes be tested on the basis of evidence. Like all propositions, counterfactuals can be falsified but never validated.

The protocols for conducting counterfactual thought experiments depend on the social domain in which they are used. The most important feature of this domain is the extent to which it is amenable to statistical laws and generalizations. History generally lies outside this domain and accordingly requires a set of protocols that are different from those used for counterfactual experimentation in the sciences. I develop a set of protocols more appropriate to history and apply them to case studies of the origins of World War I and the end of the Cold War. In the last decade new evidence and interpretations require rethinking our understanding of the causes of War and I. This evidence supports my contention that World War I was contingent in both its underlying and immediate causes. Historians have proposed a variety of underlying causes for World War I, from social Darwinism to nationalism, the alliance structure, offensive dominance and shifts in the balance of power. What made Europe ripe for war, I maintain, was not this multitude of alleged causes, but the nature of the interactions among them. The First World War is best understood as a non-linear confluence of three largely independent chains of causation. They produced independent but more or less simultaneous *gestalt* shifts in Vienna and Berlin, and a slightly earlier one in Russia. Had the timing of the Austrian and German shifts been off by as little as two years, Austrian leaders would not have been so intent on destroying Serbia or German leaders might not have encouraged them to do so and the Russians would not have been willing to risk war to risk war in Serbia's defense.

The last part of my book turn to fiction because it provides the most compelling and persuasive exploration of alternative worlds. Fact and fiction have always been intertwined in the human mind and share a common etymology in most Western languages. The idea of the "fact" as a description of the world independent of theory is an invention of the seventeenth century (Bacon 1994; Daston 1991; Dear 1995, 25). British empiricists of the latter half of the eighteenth century were drawn to history because they understood the present to be constructed on the understanding of the past. They sought rules for gathering and evaluating facts, became champions of quantitative data and tried to develop more transparent modes of presentation. David Hume rejected interpretations that were not based on particulars that could be observed and brought his understanding of induction to the study of history. He effectively debunked the idea that history told a story about a decline from a past golden age. His involvement with history nevertheless led him to conclude that it is functionally indistinguishable from novels and epic poetry because, like these forms, it is

only made meaningful by fictional emplotment; a mere recital of past events being nothing more than a chronicle. For Hume, history, freed of its Christian and mythical roots, is the proper paradigm of human understanding because it connects our consciousness with what lies outside of it. It is a “moral science” because the conventions that govern human behavior are the unintended result of individuals’ engagement with one another and the world. History helps to clarify these conventions and make them more meaningful by describing their emergence and evolution (Hume 1995; Livingston 1984, chs. 5 and 8). Many eighteenth century historical works contain features that we associate with the novel because they seek to generate knowledge through the vehicle of conversation with the reader and elicit identification with the author who appears as the principal “character” of his or her work (McKeon 1987; Siskin 1997; Poovey 1998, 15).

Thanks to Hume and his continental counterparts, by the mid-nineteenth century history had replaced poetry as the principal source of knowledge and wisdom about humanity. Poetry was subsumed under the rubric of fiction, which by now had emerged as a generic category. This reversal of the relative standing of history and poetry, or more broadly speaking, of fact and fiction, was never fully accepted by creative artists and some philosophers. Modernist writers, among them Joyce, Pound and Eliot, insisted that no era had a monopoly on experience, understanding and wisdom and that recovery of the past was essential to human fulfillment. They embraced poetry as the appropriate vehicle toward this end (Longenbach 1978, ch. 10). Nietzsche (1962) went a step further and insisted that art and music spoke a truth that went beyond words and had the potential to free people from the tyranny of logic. Twentieth century writers, whether or not they engage history, are heirs to this tradition. Many of their readers have come to accept fiction as a vehicle for stretching and challenging their consciousness and understanding of the world in ways history does not (Grossmann 1978).

Historical counterfactuals have the potential to build bridges between history and fiction. They may be used to interrogate and offer critical perspectives on history and social science or their intellectual foundations. This is the avowed goal of the short story that constitutes chapter seven of *Forbidden Fruit*. It plays psycho-logic off against the laws of statistical inference to demonstrate the inherently conservative bias of the latter with respect to alternative worlds. My story takes place in an imaginary world in which Mozart has lived to the age of sixty-five and as a result, neither world war nor the Holocaust occurred. My heroine and her partner try to imagine what the world would have been like if Mozart had died at age thirty-five, her partner’s age. The alternative world my characters invoke is a pale version of our twentieth century world with all its unspeakable horrors, and is summarily dismissed by an imaginary critic who demonstrates its political and statistical improbability. My heroine concludes with a biting if humorous rejoinder. My story does double

duty as a “long-shot” counterfactual and experimental instrument, which I use earlier in the book as part of my effort to understand how historians and international relations scholars understand causation.

I also examine more serious fiction in the form of two best-selling novels by comparing Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) with Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004). The former looks ahead to the 1936 presidential election and the victory of the fictional fascist Senator Buzz Windrip over Franklin Roosevelt. The latter looks back to the 1940 presidential election to imagine Roosevelt’s defeat by aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, in thrall to the Nazis, and whose administration is isolationist abroad and anti-Semitic at home. Strictly speaking, these novels only peripherally engage international relations. Novels about alternate worlds – especially those set in the past – are nevertheless the ultimate form of counterfactual unpacking. They speak to a fundamental goal of my book: exploring the ways in which fact and fiction work together to create a powerful impression on readers. They suggest that the binary between fact and fiction is to a great extent artificial and can creatively and usefully be bridged for analytical as well as artistic purposes. This understanding, I argue in the conclusion, has important implications for the study and practice of international relations.

Of the two novels only *The Plot Against America* qualifies as counterfactual in that it remakes the past. Counterfactual fiction almost invariably uses an antecedent – some rewrite of history – to produce a consequent in the form of an altered present. The antecedent is intended to be amplifying in its effects, taking history further away from the world we know. Roth changes history by changing the outcome of the 1940 election and making its winner subject to blackmail by Hitler, creating a sharp divergence from the history we know. Toward the end of the novel he introduces a *deus ex machina* to return history to its actual course once the alternate world he creates has served its purposes. Critics find his second order counterfactual unconvincing, but its credibility, I contend, is beside the point. Roth is a cut above other practitioners of the counterfactual novel genre, and not only by virtue of the quality of his writing. He is self-conscious and reflective about his use of history and counter-history. There is much to learn from Roth about the ways in which counterfactual history can be used to offset inherent weaknesses of the genre of history and become an effective rhetorical vehicle for advancing cultural or political projects. More importantly for our purposes, his novel drives home just how much our emotional and intellectual anchors are the product of our circumstances, circumstances that we generally take for granted. Even if they are not as contingent as *The Plot Against America* appears to suggest, they are still parochial, not universal, and certainly not pre-ordained. This realization has important consequences for our understanding of theory in the social sciences.

My conclusion builds on the findings of the earlier chapters to make more general arguments about the nature of causation and the relationship between

fact and fiction and factual and counterfactual. Drawing on World War I and the Cold War cases, it expands upon the procedure outlined earlier in *Forbidden Fruit* for determining the relative weight of systematic and non-systematic causes in individual cases. It develops a strategy for using counterfactuals to explore non-linear causation. It reviews the findings of my two experimental studies and their implications for international relations theory and the ability of scholars to meet the cognitive and ethical requirements Weber associates with good theory. A final section attempts to build bridges between literature and social science. It does so by revisiting the binary of fact and fiction. I argue that we should recognize the tensions and fuzziness that surround this binary and exploit them for creative ends, as do social scientists who conduct counterfactual research and novelists who write counterfactual fiction. Until now, these projects, often on parallel tracks, have had no switches connecting them. My book aspires to remedy this situation to the benefit, I believe, of both communities.

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